

**Michael B. Mangini, Esq.**

Adler–Aquinas Institute  
Manitou Springs, CO, USA

## **COMMON SENSE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS**

The chief aim, the final cause, of this study is to foster a better understanding of how noetic, metaphysical, and semiotic preconditions rooted in the philosophy of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas contribute to a common sense biblical hermeneutic. The efficient cause is wonder over the divergent opinions of the meaning and significance of one perfect revelatory unit and the possibility of discovering how many revelatory acts constitute one unified revelatory act. The material cause is composed of (a) the noetic aspects of moderate realism; (b) the actions of sign relations in communication and interpretation; (c) the problem of the one and the many; and (d) God’s revealed word. The formal cause is movement from a nominalistic method of biblical interpretation toward a method that finds truth as revealed in God’s Word, the proper object of Christian faith, and becomes, in fact, the object of our faith. This study finds a metaphysical justification for a theologically derived principle of scriptural unity; thus showing how reason serves faith. The interpretive principles of nominalism are the interpreter’s ideas that the interpreter combines and divides at will and which terminate in the interpreter’s mind. The interpretive principles identified in this paper are: (a) the noetics of moderate realism ground the hope of successfully discerning the meaning of Scripture; (b) the nature and activity of sign relations ground the hope of successfully discovering and communicating the significance of Scripture, beyond its meaning; (c) sign relations also make possible error and deceit; and (d) respect for the metaphysics of the relationship between and among a multitude and to a chief aim encourages correct interpretation by minimizing errors in discerning meaning and significance. Before exploring this further, an explanation of the compound term ‘common sense hermeneutics’ is appropriate, but first a brief note on nominalism and principles.

For the nominalist a sign relation is a mind-dependent being of pure objectivity with no actual counterpart in what is signified.<sup>1</sup> One who engages in a nominalistic reading of the Bible expressly or implicitly tends to take liberties with the text by associating the wrong signified being with a sign vehicle. Respecting the sign relation's grounding in mind-independent reality will tend to inhibit the personal musings of the interpreter. A principle is a point of beginning of being, change, or knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Hermeneutics<sup>3</sup> is the speculative science<sup>4</sup> of biblical interpretation, the chief aim of which is to know how to interpret God's word. Its subject-matter<sup>5</sup> is composed of three species: (1) Scripture; (2) the art<sup>6</sup> of interpretation; and (3) human cognition. The three species are inextricably related, but they can stand on their own, so it is reasonable to view each of them as a distinct genus composed of species ordered to a chief aim and chief act,<sup>7</sup> but within the genus of hermeneutics they are species ordered to a chief aim. Scripture as a revelatory species is the proximate principle of the science, and the science is the proximate principle of the art. The species of human cognition, comprising the active and passive powers of the human soul that unequally contribute to the chief aim of knowing God's word, enables human beings to study the Bible and study *how* we study the Bible. The speculative genus studies how the cognitive species unites with the

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<sup>1</sup> John Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 389.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. V, 1012b34–1013a23, in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's "Metaphysics,"* trans. John P. Rowan (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), 276; Peter A. Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Manitou Springs: Adler-Aquinas Institute, Socratic Press, 2012), 138; Bernard Wuellner, *Summary of Scholastic Principles* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1956), 1–9.

<sup>3</sup> See D.G. Burke, "Interpret; Interpretation," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 863. But there is also a practical aspect that falls into the category of art. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Wuellner defines science in its strict philosophical sense as "certain intellectual knowledge of something in its causes" under "Science" in Wuellner, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> "Subject-matter" refers to what a science studies or considers. Redpath, 137–138.

<sup>6</sup> Wuellner primarily defines art as "correct knowledge joined to skill in making things" under "Art" in Wuellner, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> The analogical predication of genus and species to the same unit is dependent on the unit's relations to other units. Scripture *in se* is a genus, but as a subject of study it is a species of the science or art.

revelatory species in the interpretive species. The speculative genus is where the reflexive aspect of the cognitive species considers the relation of the revelatory, interpretive, and cognitive species. Stated another way, the art of interpretation is the activity that joins the knower to the known through sign relations, and the science is the study of the activity's causes so that the knower and known truly unite. Hermeneutics is necessary, because one cannot interpret well absent the knowledge of the conditions necessary for correct interpretation.

Common sense is more difficult to define. Étienne Gilson observes that the ambiguity of the term 'common sense' has caused grievous philosophical harm. Cicero used the term to refer to the sensibilities of an audience of which an orator must be aware in order to move the audience. It may refer to human moral intuition. One may attribute the sanctity of his pet postulate to common sense to defend against further inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

According to Thomas, the common sense, one of the interior senses, is the common root or principle of the five exterior, proper senses.<sup>9</sup> Each of the five exterior senses has an object proper to it. Sight senses white, taste senses sweetness, but neither sight nor taste can distinguish white from sweet. The common sense perceives the intentions of the proper senses and judges them.<sup>10</sup> The common sense can know all sensations and distinguish them.<sup>11</sup> The common sense is reflexive; it permits one to perceive that he is using his external senses. It is aware of the external sense impressions themselves and of the differences between the objects of each proper sense. "It is by the common sense that we are aware of our own life, and that we can distinguish between the objects of different senses, e.g., the white and the sweet."<sup>12</sup> The external senses feed the internal senses (common sense, imagination, and memory), which cooperate to unify, preserve, and recall the image of the object of sense experience. The three acts of the intellect (apprehension, judgment, and reason)<sup>13</sup> work with these images to give us knowledge. The common sense is a necessary condition precedent to apprehension, judging, and reasoning, without which we would not have

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<sup>8</sup> This treatment of common sense relies on the first chapter of Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism And The Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 27–53.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 78, 4, ad. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Id., ad. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, 2 (426b8–427a15).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's "De Anima,"* II, lect. 13, para. 390; III, lect. 2, para. 584.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Socratic Logic* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2004), 28.

concepts, judgments, and arguments.<sup>14</sup> Even so, the common sense does not assure that human beings will (1) rightly understand what they receive through the external senses; (2) correctly judge what they do understand; and (3) build sound arguments with their correct judgments. The common sense merely makes good hermeneutics and revealed knowledge possible.

In this paper the denotation of common sense is synecdochic; the internal common sense, a part of the noetic process, represents the whole noetic process, which begins in the external sense impressions and ends in the conclusions of arguments. It should also connote the commonality of specific noetic potential among human beings as well as self-evident propositions that proceed from the right use of human noetic powers (the denial of which would result in self-refutation). Into this category of propositions I put the law of con-contradiction and its corollaries; fundamental statements about the organizational structure of composed being; and averments concerning the action of signs as the foundation of communication and error. Common sense hermeneutics respects the primacy of being and the inter-subjective and supra-subjective relations among beings that permit communication.

The noetics of moderate realism provide a firm foundation upon which to build a hermeneutic of common sense, so in the first part of this paper I shall adopt Thomas Howe's argument that the noetical aspect of moderate realism is a necessary condition for correct, universally valid biblical interpretation, but I will add, "insofar as it gives us hope in discovering the true *meaning* of a given passage." In the second part, I'll rely on John Deely's work to show how semiotics may help interpreters go beyond meaning and seek the significance of the persons, places, events, ideas, etc. of which the meaning of the text has presented as objects to be interpreted. It is in significance that the unity of Scripture is found. The chief aim is what every passage of the Bible signifies. Considered as a genus, Scripture is composed of many parts/species that are ordered to a chief aim. This is the structure of common sense hermeneutics; therefore in the third part I shall restate Peter Redpath's exposition of Aristotle and St. Thomas's ontology of the one and the many and analogously apply it to the question of how an exegete can discern the proper significance and faithfully interpret the word of God.

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<sup>14</sup> Id.

### Meaning and the Noetics of Moderate Realism

There are many good expositions of moderate realism and its noetic aspects,<sup>15</sup> but the value of Thomas Howe's work is that it expressly gives a moderate realist's answer to the question of whether or not a universally valid interpretation of the Bible is possible.<sup>16</sup> According to Howe, the debate among Christian scholars over the possibility of an 'objective'<sup>17</sup> biblical interpretation—one that is universally valid and free from the influence of cultural and historical presuppositions—is fundamentally a difference of opinion between epistemological representationalists (nominalists) and noetic moderate realists.<sup>18</sup> Interpreters who view ideas and concepts as mentally created copies with no essential relation to the real things known will naturally overemphasize the influence of cultural and historical presuppositions on hermeneutics and deny the possibility of objective biblical interpretation. Interpreters who consider ideas and concepts as formal signs, the forms of the known real things abstracted from their material conditions and existing intentionally in the interpreter, will accept the relation between the knower and the known and affirm the possibility of objective biblical interpretation. Interpreters in the former class doubt their ability to know the truth of God's revelation, but interpreters of the latter class have hope of success, to change from ignorance to knowledge. Thus, the moderate realist can resist the temptation to eisegete the text and avoid, or at least mitigate, the perils of hermeneutical nominalism. A brief restatement of moderate realism may make this evident.

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, trans. Philip Trower (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press: 1990), Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism And The Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986); Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2008); Hermann Reith, *The Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1958); Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1956).

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas Howe, *Objectivity in Biblical Interpretation* (Kindle Electronic Edition 2012).

<sup>17</sup> The reader should note that Howe uses the word 'objective' to signify the concept of "some kind of neutrality or of some universally applicable perspective" (Id., Chapter 6, 4781–4790.) In this paper I equivocate in the meaning of 'objective' and its various forms, because Howe and Deely use them differently. For Deely, an object is that which is known. An object may be a real, mind-independent thing, a subject, or it may be a mind-dependent being of reason, which is not a subject, but is objective.

<sup>18</sup> Id., Chapter 3, 2135–2137, 2331–2332; Chapter 5, 3680–3685; Chapter 6, 5058–5065, 5086–5087.

According to Gilson, as a result of Immanuel Kant's modification of René Descartes's improper application of the mathematical method to metaphysics most modern thinkers begin with the "idea that philosophical reflection ought necessarily to go from thought to things."<sup>19</sup> Methodical realists accept that philosophical reflection necessarily remotely begins in the senses and terminates in the intellect, neither in the senses nor imagination.<sup>20</sup> The material of our thought comes from outside in; therefore, absent sense data we have nothing to think about.<sup>21</sup> We apprehend reality when we receive the form of a thing, abstracted from its material conditions, through the senses and the intellect forms an image (phantasm). Human beings use images of material things to think about abstract, immaterial things.

In the first intellectual act of apprehension,<sup>22</sup> we produce images as we encounter a real object, when our memories recall a previously produced image stored in the memory, and as we study and come to know something through reading and hearing. The image may be from a previous encounter with a sensate object. The image may be a non-sensate complex of judgments.<sup>23</sup>

The second act of the intellect is judgment, which produces true or false propositions. In every proposition, which is the product of judgment and which is either true or false, the intellect "either applies to, or removes from the thing signified by the subject, some form signified by the predicate . . ."<sup>24</sup> Truth is relational; it is found in the real relations that really exist between real things in extra-mental, metaphysical structure of reality. The judgment, and our appreciation of its significance, is enriched as we increase our knowledge of each concept and how they relate to one another in reality. Methodical realism "is emphatically not an abstract philosophy of possible beings."<sup>25</sup> The realist's goal is not to cleverly devise amalgams of images and concepts (fables), "for the ultimate end of the intellect is to conceive reality as it is, and reality simply is not a mosaic of essences."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 17–18.

<sup>20</sup> Redpath, 162

<sup>21</sup> Id., 73.

<sup>22</sup> Also called 'understanding'. Kreeft, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Wilhelmson, 109–117.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 16, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 233.

<sup>26</sup> Id., 229.

The third act of the intellect is reason. Reason extends our knowledge beyond what we immediately apprehend. The act of reasoning synthesizes judgments, knowledge about what we have sensed, to reach a conclusion, knowledge of what is beyond our sense experience.<sup>27</sup>

Howe summarizes the act of knowing:

The Moderate Realist view of knowledge as presented began with sense cognition which issued in the formation of the phantasm, the form of the thing in reality, separated from its matter but not from its concrete material conditions. The agent intellect illuminates the intelligible aspect of the phantasm that is the common nature or essence of the thing. It abstracts this essence from the phantasm forming an intelligible species that is impressed upon the possible intellect. The possible intellect, in an act of understanding, expresses this intelligible species in the form of an idea or concept. The intellect, by means of the expressed intelligible species, also called the idea or concept, knows the thing in reality. The knowable thing has become the known object of the intellect, and knowledge is the result.<sup>28</sup>

Howe also recognizes the distinction between meaning and significance and quotes E.D. Hirsch:

The important feature of meaning as distinct from significance is that meaning is the determinate representation of a text for an interpreter. An interpreted text is always taken to represent something, but that something can always be related to something else. Significance is meaning-as-related-to-something-else.<sup>29</sup>

Howe further warns against confusing the two.<sup>30</sup> Meaning is the foundation of significance, but significance or interpretation is legitimate as long as it does not distort the meaning of the text.<sup>31</sup>

For reasons that should become apparent, Howe's explication of the distinction between meaning and significance is particularly salient. A word is a conventional sign that conveys meaning, and meaning is the concept (or idea) that one associates with the word. The concept is the

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<sup>27</sup> Kreeft, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Howe, Chapter 8, 7357–7363.

<sup>29</sup> Id., Chapter 10, 8578–8582, quoting E.D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 79–80.

<sup>30</sup> Howe, Chapter 10, 8657–8660.

<sup>31</sup> Id., 8676–8684.

formal sign, that is a composed being's form existing immaterially in the intellect of the knower, which points to the being as composed of matter and form. Form determines matter as act determines potency. Just as the form of a being determines its matter and moves the being from potency to act, so the abstracted form of the being informs the matter of the word and gives it meaning. The complex of letters becomes a meaningful word, but the same word may signify many concepts, so the interpreter has the task of discerning from the context precisely what concept, meaning, the author intended to convey.<sup>32</sup> The reader learns what the author intended to communicate about the persons, places, things, ideas, actions, relationships, substances and accidents about which the author wrote. One can, however, rightly understand the meaning of a text while missing its significance, because the meaning of the words is not the same as the significance of the events. Even so, knowing the correct meaning of the words is a necessary condition for discerning the significance of that which the text describes. Linguistic communication is just one kind of semiotic communication.<sup>33</sup>

### Significance and Semiosis

All human organizations require communication, and all communication requires sign relations and networks of sign relations. Moderate realism provides a firm noetic foundation for understanding the ubiquitous communicative networks that we observe throughout the created order, including special revelation, that transfer meaning as well as significance. Thought and communication rely on signs; correspondence between thought and real things is possible only because sign relations are indifferent to the orders of real being and thought being.<sup>34</sup> The formal sign is the sign vehicle that points to another being that is either a substantial, existent thing composed of matter and form, a mind-independent real being (*ens reale*), or a being of reason alone (*ens rationis*). The word, the instrumental sign vehicle, points to the formal sign. The author of a text combines words into sentences, paragraphs, books, etc., that convey meaning through complexes of formal sign vehicles, but once an interpreter discovers the

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<sup>32</sup> Lack of precision leads the interpreter into the error of 'illegitimate totality transfer' or 'unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field,' in which the interpreter imposes the full range of possible meanings. D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 60–61.

<sup>33</sup> Deely, 155–156.

<sup>34</sup> Id., 51.



meaning he can then go on to discover the significance of the whole text and its parts. The complexes of persons, places, events, ideas, relations, etc., that the meaning derived through the formal signs reveals are further sign vehicles that point to something else. Although meaning is discoverable within the immediate context, the interpreter discovers significance by relating the part to a whole ordered to a chief aim. Semiosis, the action and nature of signs, accounts for the discovery of the one proper significate related to meaning and significance as well as the many possible interpretive errors.

A sign is an irreducibly triadic, suprasubjective relation<sup>35</sup> that, by virtue of its being a relation, is indifferent to the orders of rational being and real being, mind-dependence and mind-independence.<sup>36</sup> Signs are irreducibly triadic in that they necessarily are composed of (1) an interpreter, (2) a sign vehicle, and (3) a significate (that which is signified).<sup>37</sup> They are suprasubjective in that they do not rely on any relation between real, subjective beings to exist. Signs may be intersubjective, but they are not necessarily so; they extend beyond mere subjectivity. A relation may exist between real or imagined subjectivities,<sup>38</sup> and a relation judged to be fictional could be real or *vice versa*.<sup>39</sup> Signs are indifferent to the orders of rational, objective being (*ens rationis*) and real, subjective being (*ens reale*) in that they do not rely on real beings to exist. The orders of subjectivity and objectivity are not opposites.

Deely eschews the modern opposition of subjectivity and objectivity<sup>40</sup> and returns to the scholastic usage. Objective means whatever exists as known; subjective means whatever exists independently of being known.<sup>41</sup> Subjectivity refers to what exists independently of human thought, belief, feeling, or desire.<sup>42</sup> Intersubjectivity names a dyadic relation that has both a basis and a terminus in subjectivity.<sup>43</sup> Subjectivity and intersubjectivity constitute mind-independent reality that exists even when no one is aware of it.<sup>44</sup> Objectivity exists in awareness as cognized. Purely

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<sup>35</sup> Id., 87.

<sup>36</sup> Id., 93.

<sup>37</sup> Id., 16.

<sup>38</sup> Id., 27.

<sup>39</sup> Id., 93.

<sup>40</sup> Id., 116–117, 123–124.

<sup>41</sup> Id., 84.

<sup>42</sup> Id., 34.

<sup>43</sup> Id., 28, 152.

objective being has no being other than as known; it has no subjectivity, no being apart from awareness. An object may also exist as a subject but it is not necessary for it to do so.<sup>45</sup> When a previously unknown subject becomes known, objectivity is added to its subjectivity, and the orders overlap.<sup>46</sup> To further complicate matters: (1) an objective subjectivity may cease to exist as a subject and continue to exist only as an object; (2) a pure object may come to exist subjectively and become an objective subjectivity; or (3) an objective subjectivity may be forgotten and lose its status as object but remain a subject. In every case where there is objectivity or objectivity plus subjectivity there is a triadic sign relation, and the relation is suprasubjective, beyond the limits of intersubjectivity.

While subjectivity and intersubjectivity may exist apart from sign relations, objectivity requires triadic sign relations. Thought, knowledge, communication, response, truth and error, and agreement and disagreement all depend on triadic sign relations. Suprasubjective, triadic sign relations make truth possible, but they also make deceit possible.<sup>47</sup> The nature of signs permits human beings to build relations and webs of relations without limit.<sup>48</sup> It also permits the interpreter to associate the wrong significate with the vehicle or mistake one for the other. There seems to be no limit to the potential mischief.

The reader should underscore two points in this part. First, words and formal signs are sign vehicles that point to persons, places, events, ideas, relations, and other subjects and objects that are also sign vehicles that point to something else. Words and formal signs point to meaning; the referents point to significance. So there are at least two layers of sign relations in Scripture. Second, the suprasubjective nature of sign relations permits thought and communication as well as truth and deceit, agreement and disagreement, and there is no apparent curb within the nature of sign relations to limit the potential to misread, create, or ignore sign relations. There seems to be no limit on the ways biblical interpreters risk taking the Lord's name in vain; yet, there must be something available to keep the intellect's attention within the range of the proper significates of the words, concepts, and the narratives, poetry, wisdom, epistles, etc., of Scripture.

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<sup>44</sup> Id., 35.

<sup>45</sup> Id., 45.

<sup>46</sup> Id., 123.

<sup>47</sup> Id., 142.

<sup>48</sup> Id., 44.

The Aristotelian-Thomistic account of the problem of the one and the many offers such a curb.

### Revelatory Genus: Genesis to Revelation

The individual words of Scripture deliver meaning to the interpreter, but the complex of meanings that the words signify, passages, for example, are themselves sign vehicles that point to something else. Often when an interpreter asks, “What does this passage mean?” he is properly asking after the significance of the passage, that is, what does God intend to signify by conveying information about this particular event? There is a necessary interpretive step beyond receiving the bare meaning through the words. The chief aim of Scripture determines the significance of the passages, each of which is one part among many that when ordered to the chief aim of Scripture relates to other parts and is seen as a part of the whole. Thus, to understand the significance of any passage the interpreter must know the chief aim of Scripture and avoid taking the passage as a self-standing unit to which the interpreter is free to relate his own ideas or construct his own purely objective sign relations. The interpreter prescribes neither the chief aim nor the significance; the author does. The Pharisee Saul knew the meaning of the *tanakh*, but not until Christ revealed the chief aim of Scripture to him did St. Paul see in the Old Testament its true significance. The balance of this section will describe the Aristotelian-Thomistic account of the problem of the one and many, and analogously predicate it to Scripture.

All philosophy/science studies the multifarious ways many beings relate to one proximate subject and unequally participate in the unity of the subject.<sup>49</sup> All philosophy and every science seek knowledge of how many beings become one being.<sup>50</sup> Philosophers and scientists seek to discover order in multitude by identifying how many parts cooperate to achieve a common chief end and thereby constitute one whole subject. As Redpath writes, “Every science investigates a genus, a multitude of species, with respect to a chief aim.”<sup>51</sup> The two-fold order of things is evident: parts relate to parts to form a whole, and all the parts relate to a chief aim, end, or purpose. The latter order holds the whole together; the chief aim is the

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<sup>49</sup> Redpath, 144, citing Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. 12, Ch. 1 (1069a18–1069b32) and *Posterior Analytics*, Bk. 2, Ch. 2 (90b14–16).

<sup>50</sup> Redpath, 145.

<sup>51</sup> Id., 168, n. 61, citing Aquinas, *Commentary on the “De Trinitate of Boethius,”* 5, 1, reply.

principle of unity.<sup>52</sup> Without a chief aim there is nothing to unify individuals into parts of a whole.<sup>53</sup> If the chief aim changes, then the relations among the parts change and the nature of the whole changes and becomes something different. The proximate aims and acts of the parts must likewise change so that they are ordered to the new chief aim. If the chief aim is lost, then the relations among the parts are lost and the whole ceases to exist. The related individuals that formerly were parts become unrelated individuals.<sup>54</sup> So the first task of any philosophy/science is to identify its chief aim as well as the chief aim of the genus (or genera) the science studies, but the science must also understand the limits of potentiality of the species and how they unequally contribute to the chief aim.<sup>55</sup>

Every part has its own internal and external limitations, its own qualities.<sup>56</sup> The matter of a being, its innate potentiality, imposes internal limits on how the being can act. The substance and accidents of external beings further determine the range of acts within a given potency. So to truly understand a generic subject one must not only describe how a species contributes to the chief aim, but also must know to what extent it can and cannot contribute according to its qualities. The highest species has the greatest potential to be activated by the chief aim; its possession of the chief aim and contribution to it is greater than all other species of the hierarchy; and the highest species is the measure of all subordinate species.<sup>57</sup> The chief aim is chiefly communicated through the chief possessor to the lesser possessors as proper to their range of potential, *according to their qualities*. If this were not the case, there would be no activity. Knowing the aims and the qualities of the species equips the observer to recognize the nature of the generic and specific acts.

The acts serve the chief aim, even as the chief aim determines the acts. The acts move the genus from a state of privation of the chief aim to a greater state of possession.<sup>58</sup> The chief aim informs the specific matter, activates its potential to achieve the chief aim. The informed matter, the multiple species acting cooperatively to achieve the chief aim is the es-

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<sup>52</sup> Id., 173, n. 70, citing Aquinas, *Commentary on the "De Trinitate of Boethius,"* 6, 4, reply.

<sup>53</sup> Id., 176.

<sup>54</sup> Id., 177.

<sup>55</sup> Id., 191.

<sup>56</sup> Id., 197–201.

<sup>57</sup> Id., 178.

<sup>58</sup> Id., 197.

sence of the genus. To complete one's grasp of a genus, one should inquire into the origin of the genus, its point of beginning, its source.

Anyone familiar with Aristotle's four causes will recognize them in the preceding paragraphs. The aim is the final cause; the species are the material cause; the acts are the formal cause; and the origin is the efficient cause. Philosophical/scientific knowledge is the knowledge of a subject by its four causes.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the notion of contrary opposition adds much to scientific and philosophical study. Contrary opposition describes the degree of privation and possession within a genus.<sup>60</sup> Think of it as a continuum in which the limits of privation and possession are contrary opposites. Degrees of possession and privation fall in the continuum between contrary opposites.<sup>61</sup> Contradictory opposites are beyond the continuum; there is complete possession and complete privation and no potential for movement between the two. Contrary, not contradictory, opposition permits qualitative, specific differences that are required to achieve the chief aim. We measure species by the degree of their possession and privation of the chief aim and the degree to which they contribute to the chief aim. But the qualitative differences among the species, the degrees of privation and possession, do not mean that the species are not part of and contributing to the genus. Every species unequally possesses and contributes to the chief aim.

Every science understands its subject-matter, and each part of its subject-matter, according to its four causes and according to how its parts relate to each other as each part unequally and analogously relates to the chief aim, thus forging one whole unity.

Scripture is a revelatory genus comprising many parts/species that are ordered to a chief aim. God intended every full passage of Scripture to contribute to the chief aim of His word. This is one reason that context is so important, because every word, sentence, paragraph, book, and testament is a part of a whole insofar as it contributes to the chief aim. Analogously, a human being is a cognitive genus comprising bodily and intellectual powers, the species/parts, all ordered to a chief aim. Rightly identifying the chief aims of the genera/species supports the endeavor of seeking the proper significate.

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<sup>59</sup> Id., 156.

<sup>60</sup> Id., 203, quoting Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. 10, Ch. 4 (1055a33–1055b3).

<sup>61</sup> Id., 153.

## Conclusion

Biblical hermeneutics requires understanding of the powers and activities of the human soul as they relate to cognition; this is foundation of common-sense hermeneutics. The hermeneutist must also understand the art of biblical interpretation according to its four causes and chief aim, because the interpretive art relies on the conclusions of the science. The hermeneutist must also know Scripture according to its four causes and chief aim. Without such knowledge there is no unified subject, no science, and only some loose confederation of conjectures and opinions. Only after knowing the genera as genera can the hermeneutist appreciate them as species of the generic science. Within the genus of hermeneutics, Scripture is the highest species, because it determines the activities of the other species, that is, the intrinsically limited cognitive powers are extrinsically determined by the mode and message of Scripture. The Bible determines meaning and significance, not the interpreter, and in order to respect this authoritative function the hermeneutist must order all the parts, passages, to the chief aim, which determines each interpretive act. An interpreter who identifies the chief aim as M will interpret differently from an interpreter who identifies C as the chief aim. The significates of their triadic sign relations will probably differ. Both may agree on the meaning of the text, but they will probably disagree about its significance. If an interpreter's identification of the chief aim differs from time to time, he will interpret inconsistently and fail to appreciate the coherence of Scripture. What, then, is the chief aim?

The chief aim of Scripture is to reveal *something*.<sup>62</sup> The chief act is the revealing of *something*. Scripture is revelatory; it communicates something that was unknown. Considered as a genus, each part unequally contributes to the chief aim of revealing something. Each part has a proximate aim of contributing to revealing the remote aim, which is to reveal *something*. In order to understand the proximate aim of a given part, one must know the chief aim of the genus. Thus to rightly interpret Scripture one must rightly identify the *something* that God reveals in Scripture.

Scripture, the word of God (2 Timothy 3:14–17), reveals its own chief aim: to reveal the sinfulness of human beings so that we can repent and accept the forgiveness that Christ gives us in his crucifixion. God revealed his love for his creation in the crucifixion of his Son (John 3:16; cf.

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 1.

Hebrews 9:22). John's baptism was of repentance (Mark 1:4; Acts 13:24; 19:4), a necessary condition for forgiveness through baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (1 John 1:8–10; 2:12). Jesus shed his blood for the forgiveness of sin (Matthew 26:28) and commissioned his Apostles to preach repentance and forgiveness of sin to the ends of the earth (Luke 24:44–48; Acts 2:36–41; 5:27–33; 10:34–44; 13:15, 38–39). The Father gave the words to the Son, and the Son gave the words to the Apostles (John 17:1–23), and the Apostles have given the word to us in the inspired Scripture as preached and taught correctly (Ephesians 4:11ff).

The passages that reveal the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ, who is the sign vehicle that points to the Father (John 14:8–9; Colossians 1:15; Ephesians 1:7–10), are the highest revelatory species that perfectly communicate the chief aim of Scripture, so all other passages are ordered to the chief aim through these. Jesus says, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40; cf. Luke 24:13–28; Acts 8:26–36; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14). So, biblical passages are networks of sign relations, the vehicles of which are words (instrumental signs) and concepts (formal signs) that point to historical people, events, etc. The proper significance of biblical passages is discovered by reading them: (1) with due respect for their meaning; (2) as sign vehicles grounded in mind-independent reality to which we can attach the proper or improper significates; and (3) as they relate to one another as ordered to the chief aim revealed in the highest species, the incarnate and risen Son of God who allowed himself to be crucified for the forgiveness of our sin.

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## COMMON SENSE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

### SUMMARY

Since the noetics of moderate realism provide a firm foundation upon which to build a hermeneutic of common sense, in the first part of his paper the author adopts Thomas Howe's argument that the noetical aspect of moderate realism is a necessary condition for correct, universally valid biblical interpretation, but he adds, "insofar as it gives us hope in discovering the true *meaning* of a given passage." In the second part, the author relies on John Deely's work to show how semiotics may help interpreters go beyond meaning and seek the significance of the persons, places, events, ideas, etc., of which the meaning of the text has

presented as objects to be interpreted. It is in significance that the unity of Scripture is found. The chief aim is what every passage of the Bible signifies. Considered as a genus, Scripture is composed of many parts/species that are ordered to a chief aim. This is the structure of common sense hermeneutics; therefore in the third part the author restates Peter Redpath's exposition of Aristotle and St. Thomas's ontology of the one and the many and analogously applies it to the question of how an exegete can discern the proper significance and faithfully interpret the word of God.

**KEYWORDS:** common sense, hermeneutics, Bible, language, interpretation, realism, nominalism, semiotics, Thomas Howe, John Deely, Peter Redpath.